DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 474 753 FL 024 579

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TITLE The Door into Other Lives.

PUB DATE 1991-00-00

NOTE 13p.

PUB TYPE Opinion Papers (120) -- Reports - Evaluative (142)

EDRS PRICE EDRS Price MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.

DESCRIPTORS *Communication Apprehension; *Cultural Awareness; Educational Strategies; *English (Second Language); Individual Differences; Instructional Effectiveness; *Language Attitudes; Language Role; Language Usage; *Learning Strategies; Second Language Instruction; Second Language Learning; *Second Languages; Sociocultural Patterns; Teacher Attitudes; Teaching Methods

ABSTRACT

Adapted from a speech to Japanese high school students in an English track program, this essay responds to the common question, "What is the best way to learn English?" First, it is noted that English can not be learned directly from dictionaries and grammar books, by empty repetition of words and phrases with passive attitude, with fear of making mistakes, without using the language, without looking for its usefulness, and in an environment that is not relaxed, respectful, and helpful. Then it is proposed that English must be learned by actively using opportunities to speak it, and that a passive or fearful attitude is the main obstacle in learning a second language. It is argued that student anxiety about making mistakes in language learning is universal, and that the common teacher response to this is as a perceived threat. Anecdotes from students and teachers alike are used as illustration. It is concluded that the best second language learners are those who take risks, anticipate both success and error, and find in language learning a way to learn about one's own and others' culture. (MSE)

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〔聖徳学園　岐阜教育大学紀要　第22集　1991年〕

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The Door Into Other Lives

Gene van Troyer

Note: *This essay is from a speech the author delivered to the English Track students of Kaihô Senior High School, in Naha, Okinawa, on Nobember 8, 1989. It has been slightly revised to fit essay rather than speech format, but because the "voice" is such an integral part of this essay, the author has opted to retain the informal style of discourse. Readers should imagine a gymnasium holding an audience of 200+ senior high school students and their language teachers, and that they, too, are in the audience.*

KEY WORDS

acquisition, behavior, classroom environment, educational psychology, ESL / EFL, language teaching, language and culture, second language learning

As a "native-speaker teacher" of English as a second or foreign language, I'm frequently asked by not only Japanese students, but by Japanese teachers of English, "What is the best way to learn English?" It's a question that drives me to distraction! *How to learn Engish...*

A hard question to answer...

How to learn English...

You know something? As long as I've been teaching English as a second or foreign language—and that's about 16 years—I'm not sure I *know* how to learn English, or any other language.

How, to me, means that perhaps there is a *best way*, an *only* way, to learn another language. Since I'm a teacher, this suggests to me that there must a "best way", an "only" way, to *teach* another language. Unfortunately, in my 16 years as a language teacher, I've never been able to discover *What* that "best way" is...

Can you guess why?

It's because of people like you. Regardless of your age, regardless of whether you are students or teachers, you're all *people*, individual human beings with your own styles of learning, and the *best way* for you is your *own* way. The dilemma, of course, is that

in a classroom setting, students must harmonize their individual styles of learning so that everyone in the class has the best chance to learn as much as they can. And teachers must understand as best they can that not everyone learns the same way as everyone else, and that they must be flexible and tolerant of these differences, and respect them. Such tolerant flexibility and respect tells students that the teacher is aware of them as human beings, and in the long run this encourages students to have the confidence to try their best. This is important in all areas of education, and especially important in language education.

It is important because, of all our activities in life, language—our ability to express our thoughts and feelings to others—language is our most intimate form of behavior in society. We express our love for others, our hatred, our disdain, our liking or disliking, our respect or disrespect, our ideas, our sense of community in language. Language is a complexly structured behavior system that allows us to know ourselves and gain some understanding of others, and to understand ourselves as a community of human beings. Our ability to speak our language is, I believe, a formative root of our personalities.

Because language is such an intimate part of our lives, we are, as a rule, extremely sensitive to any comment from others that our way of speaking may be improper or otherwise mistaken. In terms of the language we speak everyday—in your case Japanese, in my case English—such improprieties and mistakes make us feel isolated from our peer group, as if we're no longer a member of our society, and that is a very frightening feeling. Criticism of our language usage makes us feel as if the integrity of our souls is being attacked, as if the person doing the criticizing is trying to belittle us.

I think you must be wondering by now what this has to do with the question of "How to Learn English". I think it has quite a lot to do with it.

When we learn a second language—in this case, English—we are not just learning an abstract system of sounds, words and grammar structures. We are learning a new way of behavior. Obviously this new behavior involves a large amount of cultural information which may cause a lot of frustration because we have trouble understanding not only the second language, but the new culture as well. But more than this, our intimate sense of ourselves is on the line. In learning the second language, we are required to express ourselves—to expose our personalities—in a way with which we are not completely familiar, and which may often be criticized because of the errors. Such criticism is often taken as if the critic—usually a teacher—were exposing a character defect in us, rather than in pointing out a lack of knowledge on the student's part. Unfortunately, some teachers

act as if mistakes *are* defects in character; but good teachers, I think, are careful to create conditions in which students know that criticism of their mistakes are not criticisms of them as human beings.

I'm still not any closer to telling what I think the best way to learn English is, but don't worry—I'll get there. Before I do, I want to tell what I think are the best ways how *not* to learn English, or any other language for that matter. The question of "How to Learn English" is too broad, because there are at least four areas to consider: Listening comprehension, speaking, reading, and writing. I'm assuming that the question is about speaking and listening, since these are generally considered the weakest areas of English education in Japan.

The first way not to learn English is to try learning it from dictionaries and grammar books. This approach may teach you something about reading and writing, but it won't teach you a thing about listening and speaking. Until very recently, this was the primary way that English was taught in Japanese high schools. A good friend and colleague of mine at Okinawa Christian Junior College said to me a few months ago, "This approach doesn't even teach students how to read and write—it just teaches them to decipher English, as if it were a code to be broken". As I've already said, English is a behavior to be learned, not a code to be deciphered.

The second way not to learn English is through empty, boring repetition—mindlessly saying over and over again words and sentences that are not connected with real things in your lives. This activity is known as the Audio-Lingual approach, which views language learning as the simple acquisition of speech habits. It is useful for teaching pronunciation and intonation, but not for learning "how to speak English" to communicate.

The third way not to learn English is to assume that because the teacher is offering you materials for the study of English, you can sit in class and do nothing to participate. Many students unfortunately think that they can sit in class and absorb what they're being told without trying to *use* what they've been given.

The forth way not to learn English is to be nervous about learning it, fearful that you will make mistakes and fail. Mistakes are not signs of failure; they are signs of learning. In this context, I must observe that a student's fear of failure may actually be fear of the teacher's reaction to the failure, and the possible public humiliation that might follow.

The fifth way not to learn English is to think you can learn it without using it. As the old saying goes, "Practice makes perfect", which means that you can learn an

activity only by doing it. Is it possible to learn how to be a good dancer, actor, musician, baseball or soccer player by just watching these activities on television and reading about them? The answer is, of course not. You have to do them in order to learn them well.

This brings me to the last two ways not to learn English. The sixth way is to be a student who does not think English is the least bit useful, in which case very little can be done to teach you; and the seventh way is to be in a class that does not provide a relaxed, unintimidating, respectful and helpful atmosphere, in other words an entirely negative learning environment which may help to create the student of the Sixth Way—students who become so intimidated by a negative atmosphere, that in defense of their own sense of self esteem, they abandon serious study of English.

It may seem from the above that I think there is no value to such activities as dictionary and grammar study, or structured oral repetition to teach pronunciation and intonation in English. This is not the case. Such activities have their place, but as ends in themselves they have little value when it comes to actually learning how to use English. I know this from practical experience. My introduction to the Japanese language followed this course, and after two years of study I could speak perfectly phrased statements and questions. The only problem was that I could not understand what was being said to me, and I could not create an original Japanese sentence. I could say only what I had memorized. Learning the sounds of another language is not the same as being able to use that language to communicate.

Which brings me to the thematic question: How do I think English should be learned? I'm afraid you're going to find my answer rather simple-minded: you have to learn it by doing it. Ideally this would occur in English-speaking countries, where English is spoken not only in the classrooms but outside as well. Practically speaking, this is impossible in Japan. Therefore, it is up to the teacher to structure the classroom environment to resemble as much as possible an English-speaking world, and to provide students with as many opportunities as possible to use English interactively. It is up to the students to overcome their fears of making mistakes, and to take these opportunities and learn from them. I won't go into the practical details of curriculum or teaching approaches—there are as many ways to this as there are teachers—but once the practical teaching concerns have been met, I believe that the controlling factor in language learning is *attitude*.

History records that in the Meiji Period, when Japan was opening itself to the rest of the world and sending its brightest young men to Europe and America to learn the skills that would modernize the Japanese nation, the American educator William Clark,

who helped establish the first university in Hokkaido, sent his students off with the exhortation: "Boys, be ambitious!" He meant that they should strive to reach beyond themselves, to challenge themselves, for in so doing they would achieve great results. It must have worked, for in less than 100 years Japan went from being an impoverished, technologically backward feudal society to the economic and industrial powerhouse it is today. Those boys certainly were ambitious, and if I were to change that comment, it would be to say, "Students, be ambitious!" And be a little more aggressive—reach out for that language experience.

It seems to me that too many high school (and university) students expect their teachers to do everything for them, including learn the language. With many of these students, I honestly think that I could walk into the classroom, sit down, and do nothing for 90 minutes. The students might wonder what was going on, but I would be surprised if one ventured to ask, "Sensei, are we going to do anything?" And if a student did ask that, I would wonder if it were because he or she wanted to study, or to know if class were going to be dismissed early. When called on, most of these students will do their best to answer, but otherwise they will not initiate any activity on their own. They sit and stare at their laps or whisper to their friends

To be sure, much of this behavior is cultural. As students, many of us have learned to stay silent out of deference to our teachers. But you might be surprised that not just Japanese students, but even many American students will not take the risk of trying to use the second language they are studying. They are afraid they will make mistakes, and everyone might think they are either stupid, or lazy people who haven't been studying enough. As a result, they are too shy to try. In my many years of teaching English to people from many different countries—European as well as Asian, I have seen such shyness and fear of language mistakes so often that I can only conclude that it is a natural feeling for most people. It may be most noticeable in Japan, where shyness and reserve are thought to be great virtues, but it is by no means exclusive to Japanese, especially high school and young college students. In America I had a Japanese colleague who taught Japanese at my university, and one day he confided to me how surprised he was at his American students' reluctance to try using Japanese.

"I thought Americans were supposed to be aggressive, outgoing people who never gave up!" he declared in a shocked tone of voice. "But you wouldn't believe the number of people who come to my office and plead with me to never call on them in class to speak Japanese. Aren't they taking my class to learn?"

Does this sound familiar to any of you? Of course, even with such shyness—or perhaps I should say, such lack of self-confidence—a student can still learn another language. Many people do. But they have a very frustrating, sometimes painful time doing it, and all too often the frustrations are enough to defeat them.

Now having said that, I must also honestly say that sometimes there might be a good reason for student passiveness and shyness in the language classroom. First of all, the classroom is an unnatural language learning environment. Think about it: we all learned our first language through trial and error, responding to everyday things at home with our families, and outside at play with our friends. Life and experience were our first teachers, and there was no one giving tests, assigning scores, and giving us grades. We learned through participation because we are social beings, and for the most part we were free of anxiety in this natural learning process. In the classroom we have a defined, structured situation with a teacher at the top and students at the bottom. The teacher gives out assignments, we do them, and then are scored and graded. We pray for good grades, and worry endlessly that if we make mistakes we'll be marked for life as failures. And if we make enough mistakes, the teacher is sure to remember us when grading time arrives. No wonder so many students decide it's better to keep quite and wait for the tests.

This is not at all a natural way to learn a language. However, this is a basic condition of the classroom that teachers and students alike must work around, and the discipline of required class behavior, and the criticism of abilities inherent in test scores and course grades need not be negative. Nor does teacher correction of student errors need to be negative. If students understand from the beginning that these so-called criticisms are not attacks against their self-esteem, if they can feel safe, then they might want to try to be a little more aggressive in their language studies.

Unfortunately, some teachers use criticism and grading not as if they are tools to foster improvement, but as if they are weapons with which to hector and batter their students into the desired behavior.

Let's face it: teachers are human. They have expectations that their students will learn what is being taught, and if students don't learn, some teachers take it as an insult, become very irritated, and often start to do things in class to make life miserable for the students who aren't responding well to the teacher's well-constructed lessons. This happens for a number of reasons, three of which are overly high expectations, failure to understand students as individual persons, and a sense of threat.

I think that the basic reason involves the element of threat. If students are failing to learn materials, teachers might feel that their ability to teach is questionable, or that their authority as "experts" is being challenged. Since the teacher is supposed to be the undisputed boss of the classroom, he or she might react by increasing the amount and intensity of criticism of erring students, putting them in their place, so to speak.

Are you familiar with statements like these? "What's wrong with you? Didn't you study the material? We've practiced this material over and over! If you don't know it, you certainly aren't trying hard enough! Why don't you use your brain sometimes? Are you incapable of trying harder? There's no excuse for not knowing how to do this exercise! Are you really a student? Oh, but of course, you won't know how to do this —you never do—so I'll ask someone else. You all act like you're still in kindergarten! My students in the other class have no problem with this, but I forget, none of you are as good as they are."

I'm sorry to say that I've frequently heard just such nonsense from many teachers, including myself. I've heard teachers say it to me as a student, and I've heard my colleagues saying such things to their students, and in moments of frustration, I've said such things to my students. I am not proud of any of it. Teachers, consider this:

Educational psychology has shown us, many times over, that classroom environments which create high anxiety about the students' sense of self-esteem do not stimulate learning or acquisition of skills. They only stimulate resistance to learning. Frequently students become so discouraged that they actually believe they cannot learn.

Students, take heart: such overly critical comments are not real assessments of your worth as human beings, but all too frequently are explosions of the teacher's frustrations over the fact that their meticulously prepared lessons are possibly not being fully appreciated. Believe me, this sort of thing often causes teachers to question their own worth as teachers.

In a related vein, I suspect that some teachers may actually be afraid of the abilities of some of their students, specifically students who have had the opportunity to spend a year or more abroad in English-speaking countries. When such students return to their high schools in Japan, they often have English teachers with less overseas living experience, and can speak English more fluently and naturally than their teachers. I can only imagine the agony this might cause the poor teacher, but unfortunately some of them, because of their own feelings of inadequacy, treat these returned students rather poorly.

I had such a student in an advanced night class at the Okinawa Language Center. I'll

call her Motoko, though this is not her real name. She was a senior at one of the best high schools in Okinawa. One day I asked her if she had experienced any difficulties in returning to Japanese-style high school life after spending a year as an exchange student at an American high school. This, basically, is what she told me:

"I didn't have so many problems as far as other kids at school, or in most of my classes. But my worst time was English class, my teacher, he always seemed to be attacking me. I was afraid of him. I was never afraid of my English teachers before, but he always asked me questions in class about grammar that wasn't even in the books we were studying, real hard questions that I could never answer. I never studied that kind of English even in my American high school, and none of it was covered in my Japanese textbooks either, but when I couldn't answer his questions, he'd explain the answer to the class like I was stupid because I couldn't do it. He was just using me to sound good. I really hate him".

I admire Motoko for her strength of character. She did not have to return to finish her final year at her Japanese high school, since she had graduated from the American school. She did it because she wanted to, and did not let her English teacher's poor attitude defeat her. And I pity that teacher's short-sightedness: he had a wonderful opportunity to enlist Motoko's knowledge of English to enhance the learning opportunities of her fellow English students. Instead, the opportunity was wasted. Motoko's teacher surrendered to his own despair of ever knowing English as naturally as Motoko, and punished her for reminding him of what he was unable to do.

Teachers should treat students like Motoko as the great resource that they are: people who can help them teach. Talk to them. See if, in some way, they can be your assistant. If for any reason they can't just teach as you normally would and treat them as you would any other student. Keep your expectations on a realistic level.

I'm to the point now where I must end this partly essay, partly exhortation about *How to learn English*. I hope you did not expect me to offer instant techniques for success—to my knowledge nothing like that exists outside of a lucky ticket for top prize in the *Takarakuji*. Learning another language is hard work! It can be made easier if the classroom environment fosters a feeling of security, warmth and enjoyment.

As I said at the beginning, language is our most complex form of behavior. Most of the behavior we have learned in our lives has been done in the secure fold of family and friends. I don't think it's possible that a language classroom can ever equal family or friends, but I do believe that it can, with the cooperation of teachers and students alike,

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come to reflect the same understanding and security that we expect and hope for in our home lives.

In closing, I want to offer this essay, which I've titled "The Door into Other Lives". I wrote this essay for my students at the Okinawa Language Center, and even though it has nothing to say about *how* to learn another language, I believe that it says something about *why* one should try. I may be wrong, but if people understand the *why* of what they're doing, usually the *how* quickly follows. This is from my heart to all of yours.

THE DOOR INTO OTHER LIVES

Here's to those who try to understand—the risk-takers, those who stake their confidence on chance and certain error: Here's to my students, the takers of the high road to another way of thought in a language other than their own. Your risks are seeds that will grow and blossom into wonderful flowers, so nurture them, and know that you are special. This language, English, that you learn leads not just to world-wide community, but back to yourselves. In learning about other peoples and their cultures, you will learn about Japan and yourselves.

I look at you and think of me—a me of fewer years and even less experience, new in this land, and able to see only through my American eyes. I was entranced by the exotic texture of things Japanese, but at the same time feared everything, especially my errors in the language; people would think I was silly, stupid, an object of derision, so I fled into the shell of my fellow English-speakers. I hid well among them—the Japanese who felt that foreigners could never speak their tongue, the Westerners who thoroughly agreed: "This language is a hard one", they would say, "and anyway, who needs it?"

The perfect place to hide! The scared among the scared. With nothing on the line you didn't have to try. And because I didn't try, I missed a world of experience. All of the interesting people I could have met and come to know, I did not. I let my fear of failure cheat me of the one thing I had most wanted to know about Japan: it's people. I could not talk to them, and they passed me by like so many empty, forgotten images on a television screen. They were colorful, enticing, and if they didn't speak my language, too remote to be real.

And do you know what the worst part of my feeling was?

I didn't even know what I was missing. I did not begin to know until, sick of not learning what I had come here to learn, I forced myself out of my culture-bound shell and began to learn Japanese. And the most amazing thing happened: *Japanese people started*

to become real.

They became flesh and blood human beings with hearts, minds, fears and desires, with love, hate, sorrows and joys. As clumsy as my Japanese was (and still is), I could talk to them about themselves in their own language, and share somethng of myself with them—and this, of course, is the reverse side: until I could talk to the Japanese in their own language about the contents of my own heart and mind, most of them could only see me as an image, a stereotype of what they saw on television or in magazine photographs —interesting, enticing, suggesting the wider world beyond Japan, but characterless because the exchange of sentiment was blocked by the closed door of language.

I'm glad I took the risk to overcome my fear of mistakes. It opened the door on a vaster world of precious experience that I would not trade for anything. This is why I say that you remind me of myself: you are all pushing yourselves outside of your own culture-bound shells so that you can open your own doors on another world of experience. I admire you for this, and believe that I have as much to learn from you as you have to learn from me.

Before I finish I would like to relate two anecdotes, one from my personal experience and one from Loren Eisley's book, *The Immense Journey*. When I first came to Japan, I got a job at a language school in Shibuya Ward, Tokyo. At this school worked a diminutive, rather timorous Englishman who told me during my job interview that he had lived in Japan for six years.

"Oh, so you must speak very good Japanese," I said enviously.

"No, nothing beyond daily greetings and what I need for shopping," he replied offhandedly. He saw my expression of surprise, and added, "After all, English is the international language, and besides, all of the Japanses with whom I associate speak English; so really, what's the point of learning Japanese? I have no need of it".

This man's excuse will always bring to my mind Loren Eisley's comments in *The Immense Journey*. This is a book of essay's by the late Dr. Eiseley, who was an anthropologist (and also a good poet). In the title essay he reflects on his life-long search for the nature of humankind, and speculates about those earliest of human beings who existed before the Stone Age. He speculates about the first tool, the one indispensable tool that we humans need to make all other tools, all community, all culture, all history, all sense of ourselves possible. In his speculation, Dr. Eiseley describes his earliest of humans as sitting around a camp fire millions of years ago, slowly, clumsily beginning to do something no other living creature on earth does: telling each other stories about

what each had done during their day.

"He was becoming something the world had never seen before," Dr. Eiseley wrote, "a dream animal—living at least partly within a secret universe of his own creation and sharing that secret universe in his head with other, similar heads. Symbolic communication had begun."

Language is such a precious thing. It makes us who we are in so many intimate ways. Yet it is so integral to our existence that many of us take it for granted—until we lose it, and are no longer able to share the secret universe in our heads with others. I think of that Englishman and the universes that he will never share because he does not "need Japanese." And I think of my students, learning English, and hope that their aspirations go beyond the mere learning of the "international language." I hope that their goal is to share universes.

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I. DOCUMENT IDENTIFICATION

Title: The Door Into Other Lives

Author(s): Gene van Troyer

Date: Jan. 14, 1997

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